The Biopolitics of Care in Second World War Britain, by Kimberly Mair, explores exactly what it states in the title. Published in 2022, Mair’s work explores the intricacies of home front life between 1939 and 1945, delving deeply into the societal, cultural, and biopolitical aspects that influenced life in Britain during this period. Mair, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Lethbridge, Canada, has published one book prior to this, on art and memory in response to the urban guerrillas in West Germany during the 1970s, Guerrilla Aesthetics: Art, Memory, and the West German Urban Guerrilla (2016).

Part of the Mass-Observation Critical series, an interdisciplinary series using archival materials from the original Mass-Observation (MO) movement, along with the current Mass Observation Project, Mair’s work provides a new way of looking at the experiences of the population of the British home front. Exploring the social, cultural, and biopolitical aspects of care in this period, Mair highlights that our notions of life on the home front are perhaps outdated. The thematic approach taken in this work, along with the extensive use of archival sources and other scholars’ works, allows for the advancement of the argument to the forefront of biopolitical studies and works on the MO.

The book’s first chapter explores how the MO performed what Mair calls an “ambivalent form of care” on the British home front through its observation of public feeling, belief, and action, along with its efforts to influence regulatory bodies, such as the Ministry of Information, and the forms of care it attempted to extend to the nation itself (p. 41). Mair looks at how government campaigns communicated new instructions for care formally, while the circulation of wartime rumors negotiated these instructions informally.

Chapter 2 explores evacuation, while chapter 3 examines the debate over pets and working animals, both of which were directly influenced by rumors and indirectly by the MO. Both chapters explore how “habits and behaviors have formed themselves around a definite set of social conditions and economic needs” (p. 82). The former chapter focuses on the problems that misinterpretation of rumors and news reports caused in relation to the welcoming of displaced evacuees into one’s home, while the latter addresses what Hilda Kean has described as the “animal-human
war” and the situation that arose around the keeping or removing of pets on the home front (p. 115).

The rumors that surrounded evacuees, Mair argues, openly rejected the improper upbringing of evacuee children or the inappropriate actions of young mothers, while simultaneously producing a noticeable, but oftentimes challenged, image of the host as a good wartime citizen. The host was portrayed as insusceptible to the so-called cultural faux pas of the apparent animal-like, dirty, and destructive house guest. Mair deftly explains how negative reactions toward evacuees became intermingled with prewar fears on class, race, and the supposed decline in civilization. Mair also considers the controversies over the value of the lives of pets, determined as animals who do not work with animal caregivers. Therefore, a person’s determined use of limited provisions for their pet or their personal sacrifice of removing their pets could be judged in the context of wartime hardship.

The following chapters begin to bring the arguments together. Chapter 4 explores the similar language used to describe evacuees and animals and the contradictory way the debates formed around these two topics. Lastly, the final chapter discusses how the home had an entirely separate social, cultural, and biopolitical agency, one that the MO took an entirely different approach to.

During the Second World War, official precautions advised by the government and other regulatory bodies on the home front made the management of daily life the moral duty of civil defense. Introducing new directions for the care of persons displaced by evacuation, animals, and homes, this book examines how the MO movement recorded and influenced the forms of care that became central to daily routines within the home and the wider neighborhood.

Furthermore, the MO’s investigations into daily life can be understood, as Mair explains, “in the context of the emergent twentieth-century popular cultural turn that redefined the concept of culture, which had previously excluded home, neighborhood, public square and pub” (p. 14). Also quoted is Nick Hubble, who has pointed out that the MO’s work holds an important place in the development of British cultural studies, as the MO sought new and transformative ways of seeing, making, feeling, and communicating with the British public, making it a vital tool in understanding social, cultural, and biopolitical shifts. The MO sought to personalize the care that was offered to civilians on the British home front, and despite the ambivalent definition of the term “morale,” and the fact that survey research was still a relatively recent development, the MO recognized that ordinary people had valuable information that would help to shape and shift the care that was offered to them during wartime and beyond.

Both formal and informal instructions for caregiving reshaped everyday life in the war years to a supposed notion of a “good citizen” committed to the wartime nation. Under the MO’s watchful eye, the “frontline troops” offered an insight into the “experiment” that was the British home front, something that had not or never has been experienced again (pp. 65, 158). Mair perfectly explains the opportunities for intervention, the social misinterpretations, and the cultural confusion that were prevalent on the home front, all of which many scholars have previously overlooked. Mair’s groundbreaking research presents a fresh perspective on the intricate links between everyday life, society, culture, and biopolitics on the home front in Britain during the Second World War.

The Biopolitics of Care in Second World War Britain also provides a new outlook on how the MO influenced who or what were considered worthy subjects of care, using extensive archival research into the treatment of various wartime subjects. This book is highly valuable for scholars interested in the topic of biopolitical power or those interested in how the MO’s influence in the political sphere of the everyday displays itself in
wartime policy. An extremely well-researched and insightful book, this work has opened up an entirely new direction for research into the MO archives and has provided a new thinking point into biopolitical care.

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